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AUTHOR Nelson, Carol
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ABSTRACT

This digest deals with within-class reading ability grouping. The digest discusses limitations of grouping; teacher attitudes; student recollections of ability grouping experiences; and grouping for specific purposes (focusing on cooperative learning and its benefits). The digest suggests that good teachers who provide supportive environments for their students and who are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of grouping will make the decisions that are right for themselves, for their classroom situation, and for their students. (RS)

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Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication EDO-CS-94-04

Indiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150

D91

Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847; (800) 759-4723

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Organizing for Effective Reading Instruction

by Carol Nelson

This digest deals with within-class reading ability grouping.

In instructional grouping for reading, the usual number of groups is three (Davis, 1991). Advocates of this plan justify it by facts such as these, which are supported somewhat by various studies: (1) at the Grade 1 level, the range of achievement in a class can be expected to be two or more years; (2) at the Grade 4 level, four years or more; (3) at the Grade 6 level, six years or more.

Grouping practices that are appropriate for one class may not meet the needs of another class (Sanacore, 1990; Wiesendanger and Bader, 1992). Whatever the grouping plans, it should be remembered that grouping children for reading instruction is a means for facilitating learning—it is not an end in itself.

Limitations of Grouping

Grouping within a room has some limitations. The three-group plan, or any other plan for homogeneous grouping, may make the children and their parents conscious of differences in achievement. This creates pressure on a child to measure up to the others in reading. Individual differences remain within the groups, and there is some danger that the teacher will assume that the differences have been taken care of by the mere fact that the three reading groups are in operation. If the teacher uses the same materials with all pupils, allowing only for a difference in the speed with which the groups are expected to read them, the problem of individual needs still remains unsolved. However, when teachers use different materials for the groups, the amount of preparation of work is greatly increased. Teachers must be willing to expend this extra energy to meet the needs of all the children in their classes.

Often teachers find themselves with one reading group, usually the lowest, for which a group lesson is unprofitable. The group might include children who range in ability from pre-primer to first-reader level. With a primer some children would be at a frustration level and others would be unchallenged. Only the children actually reading at the primer would profit. An individualized approach would be more beneficial for these children. In a 30-minute period with this group, the teacher could spend several minutes with each child. The others could read ahead silently in the book appropriate for them, asking for help when they met new words. Each child could progress at his/her own rate, and no two would be at the same point. Four or five minutes could be used for group discussion, motivation, words that are difficult for some children, and the like. Whenever the range of individual abilities in a group is so wide that it is impossible to choose a reading text that is reasonably satisfactory for the group's members, use of individualized approach with that group should be considered.

Teacher Attitudes

Much of the effectiveness of grouping within the class will depend on the children's understanding of the purpose for which they are assigned to the groups, and on the teacher attitudes and expectations. Many studies have looked at teacher attitudes and methods while teaching different groups (Harp, 1989). These studies often show that the high groups receive the best instruction geared to critical thinking, while the lower groups receive instruction that is less stimulating.

Some researchers have noted that many teachers give nonverbal clues to their students that they enjoy teaching the higher groups more than the lower ones, and that they expect less from the lower groups in the way of progress. Eder (1983) discusses subtle signals by which children receive information about the reading groups in their class.

Student Recollections

Many of the undergraduates in my classes over the past years have discussed their feelings about ability grouping when they were in elementary school. Recently, "Rick" wrote about why he always worked hard to remain in the middle group. He explained, "The higher group, you see, always had so much stuff to do and I never saw those kids out at recess because they had to stay in and finish what they had started. Now the lower group was not the group to be in either. Even as

Carol Nelson is Asst. Prof. of Language Education at Indiana University.

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young as first grade, I knew what it meant to be in the lower group and how those kids were thought of as 'slower' than the rest of us. This is the problem with labeling and grouping."

"Monica" wrote, "I have nothing but bad memories about my reading groups in elementary school. I was constantly being left behind and humiliated by my teacher... No attempt to help me as an individual by my teacher was ever made—and if it had, it probably wouldn't have been a pleasant one. I think that teachers should be more patient with those students who have reading problems and maybe offer other ways to help them than put them in the low group."

These young people were college juniors majoring in elementary education. Two things stand out in what they have to say: (1) Their impressions have lasted very clearly and strongly for over 10 years; and (2) If this is how young people who eventually attended college felt, what would those who quit school or those who did not go to college for various reasons have to tell us about their memories of ability groups?

Grouping for Specific Purposes

Classification of children in groups should frequently be determined by specific purposes. For example, groups may be organized for the express purpose of providing instruction in developmental reading, and individual children should be regrouped as their performance requires. In other cases, a group may be devoted to the study of specific skills, regardless of the general proficiency of the members. Research groups may be formed for pupils who wish to investigate a similar problem. Other groups interested in the same theme—such as pets, airplanes, plants—may plan presentations to the whole class. In some instances groups may be formed in which the better readers help the slower ones.

Johnson and Johnson (1987) are well-known proponents of this last type of grouping, called cooperative learning. These heterogeneous groups are based on positive interdependence among the group members who help and support one another. Their goals focus on bringing each member's learning to the maximum and on maintaining good working relationships among members. "Nothing is more basic than learning to use one's knowledge in cooperative interaction with others," the Johnsons state. And they continue: "Greater achievement is typically found in collaborative situations where peers work together than in situations where individuals work alone...."

Johnson and Johnson recommend assigning students of high, medium, and low abilities in the same group. They also suggest that it is very beneficial for those students who are not as task oriented as others to be put with their more academically oriented peers. Teachers should allow students to choose one person with whom they would like to work, and then carefully place these pairs with others to maximize the heterogeneous makeup of each group.

As the group works together as a team, some of the benefits predicted for individual members are higher critical thinking competencies, more positive social interaction with classmates, improved collaborative competencies, an understanding of other perspectives, and more self-esteem. The Johnsons believe that

- Cooperative learning procedures may be used successfully with any type of academic task, although they are most successful when conceptual learning is required.
- Whenever possible, cooperative groups should be structured so that controversy and academic disagreements among group members are possible and are managed constructively.
- Students should be encouraged to keep each other on task and to discuss assigned material in ways that ensure elaborate rehearsal and the use of higher learning strategies.
- Students should be encouraged to support each other's efforts to achieve.

Educators must make many choices every year about grouping arrangements. Good teachers who provide supportive environments for their students and who are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of grouping will make the decisions that are right for themselves, for their classroom situation, and for their students.

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